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ARE THERE NAHANI INDIANS?

by

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101 According to the map-makers two "Nahanni" Rivers flow into the Mackenzie and Liard rivers. But is there a tribe of Nahani Indians? Has anyone ever heard an Athapaskan Indian seriously designate himself as "Nahani"? There is, as will be seen, good reason why such a term would not likely be employed to refer to one's own group.

131 The logical place to look for Nahani people would be in the northern drainage slope of the Liard River or northwest of the confluence of the Liard and Mackenzie Rivers. It is here that the rivers bearing that name originate. This has long been rather sensationally described as a region of mystery, one including hidden valleys, cannibal Indians, and real enough hot springs. In 1890 Keith in his Letters to Mr. Roderic Mackenzie indeed wrote of the Fort Liard area as having been abandoned by the "Na ha ne tribe" under pressure from a new population (5, p. 11). However, this is not the only region where the elusive Nahani have been said to dwell.

From the upper Liard (Kaska) Indians, whose country borders that river from about Lower Post, B.C., to within some hundred miles of its source in the Yukon, the writer in 1944 heard that long ago Nahani hunted in the region between McDame Creek Post on Dease River eastward to Kechika River. These people are also said to have been a tribe of giants which died out because of addiction to certain evil practices (4, p.21). Dease River was at one time actually also called "Nahany" River. Another Kaska informant labelled the Pelly River people in southern Yukon Territory as Nahani. It is doubtful that they would acknowledge the designation.

101 While at Fort Nelson, B.C., in 1943, the writer was assured that Nahani merely constituted another name for the Kaska Indians (there called Grand Lakers) who were said to live west of Nelson Forks and northwest of Fort Nelson (3, p. 24). When

101 contacted the next year, the Kaska did not agree but, as already indicated, were ready with another application of the word (4, p. 21). The Handbook of American Indians, published by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1912, also locates Indians called "Nahane" in the region west of the Rockies, i.e., the territory of the Kaska (1, p. 10). The Bureau's more recent Indian Tribes of North America (1952) gives "Nahane" as signifying "people of the west" and identifies them as a major division of the Athapaskan linguistic stock including the several bands called Kaska as well as certain Tahltan Indians (6, p. 583).

Among possible conclusions, one is that the Nahani are a most nomadic tribe, shifting their location frequently and traveling long distances. Another is that the designation, Nahani, has at various times been applied to quiet distinct groups of people. The latter conclusion is distinctly more plausible. A hypothesis to explain this multiple usage of the word is not difficult.

Quite clearly "Nahani" is not of Indo-European origin. It is reasonable to assume that the word diffused to Europeans from Athapaskan speakers. But to whom did those speakers themselves apply the term? The situations in which the designation would likely be used became clear when the meaning of the word is explicated. The key to this lies in the bound morpheme na-, which signifies "enemy" or "hostile" (2, p. 225). The remaining morphology must be left to a better qualified Athapaskanist than this writer. It would seem that various Athapaskan people at different times designated relatively remote or distrusted Indian groups as evil, untrustworthy, or hostile. The literature contains numerous references to "Bad people." European visitors borrowed the appellation without fully understanding the context of use. By applying it to specific groups of Indians they have complicated the tribal distribution pattern.

Athapaskan Indians may still today use the word in this sense for people of whom they possess little knowledge, although tribal isolation is largely a thing of the past. But the word has also been reinterpreted within Athapaskan culture. The redefinition makes the meaning compatible with the altered situation. Nahani are now said to have lived in the past and to have disappeared. Thus, the current dwellers of the Kechika valley are no longer Nahani to the upper Liard River Kaska. Formerly, however, a

quite distinct and evil population dwelt there. [10]

"Nahani" would probably not so readily have come to serve as a tribal designation in English if the northern Athapaskans more frequently applied names to themselves. This, however, appears to have been most uncommon. Bands were content to refer to themselves as dene, "human beings," and labels like "Slave," "Kaska," "Goat Indians," "Brush Dwellers," "Sekani," and others are appellations originally applied by neighboring groups or invading foreigners. For example, the Cree appear to have bestowed the name "Slave" on certain Mackenzie River people. The term Etchaottine, "dwellers in a brushy place" or "Brush People" for the people along Fort Nelson River and Bistcho Lake probably originated with neighbors. When neighbors feared or mistrusted the people they were talking about, the term "Nahani" was applied rather than a less forceful, purely descriptive name.

Are there Nahani Indians? Taking the position of some small, fearful Indian band which felt its safety menaced by mysterious neighbors who dwelt across the divide, yes, there were Bad People. But what group would normally acknowledge that they truly represented Nahani? Ethnographically the label has little value and should be left solely as a geographical place-name.

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